

Gorbachev: France Also Didn't Grant Independence 'Overnight'

Tourists may view the French islands of New Caledonia as a South Pacific paradise, but Mikhail Gorbachev made clear yesterday he considers them the equivalent of Lithuania.

For the second time since he began his North American tour, the Soviet president likened the status of the remote French possession, 800 miles east of Australia, to his own dilemma over the future of the Baltic republic, which has declared its independence from the Soviet Union.

As he did at a Wednesday news conference in Ottawa, Gorbachev noted yesterday that after France was confronted with demands for New

Caledonia's independence, it agreed on a plan that could give the islands independence after 10 years of increasing self-government.

"How, then, is it possible for us to resolve issues such as this [Lithuanian independence] overnight . . . ?" Gorbachev asked. In Ottawa, the Soviet leader had made the same comparison and complained that advocates of an independent Lithuania were giving his government only "10 hours" to resolve the republic's demands.

Kenneth Bailes, a State Department spokesman, said yesterday that while he agreed the New Caledonia issue has been difficult for the

French to resolve, other aspects of the islands' future were "not at all relevant to Lithuania."

Unlike Lithuania, where a single ethnic group appears largely united in support of independence, the 164,173 residents of New Caledonia are split three ways over the islands' future, Bailes said.

In 1988, after years of debate, France announced a controversial plan to increase the islands' self-government and allow for independence after a referendum in 1998. Disputes over the plan have led to sporadic but bloody clashes between separatists and French officers there.

—Bill McAllister

